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Digital Unreason: Jordan Wolfson's 'evil Jew'

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Abstract

'anti-Semitism is the rumour about Jews.' (Adorno, 2006:141)

This essay privileges an analysis of the film *Animation, masks*, (2011) by the Jewish-American contemporary artist, Jordan Wolfson. This animated film is over ten minutes long and features only one character, based on a collection of references Wolfson found under the Google search terms 'evil Jew' and 'Shylock' (Norden, 2013). One of the key references for this 'evil Jew' stereotype, 'Le Happy Merchant', is a popular meme circulating the 4chan media network and has become a mascot of the so called 'alt-right' - a loose network of racists and antisemites that became militant supporters of the 2016 Donald Trump presidential campaign and presidency (Bernstein, 2015). In Wolfson's version of the meme, professional American animators were hired to give this stereotype the illusion of life. The result is a fascist stereotype restaged as an endearing Dreamworks character, unpredictable and incoherent, lurching between violent and placatory gestures.

Rather than attempt a close film analysis, this essay argues that Wolfson's social link to stereotype, conspiracy theory and fascist rebellion requires greater interrogation in light of the Donald Trump campaign, Brexit and the Le Pen candidacy. In all these campaigns a vitalistic critique of metropolitan 'elites' or 'globalists' became the anti-establishment pretext for verbal assaults on immigrants, people of colour and muslims (Reuters, 2017). Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle (2015) connect a popular upsurge in conspiratorial thinking to an absented critique of capitalism. They claim that if the abstract and impersonal character of capitalism is never awarded popular interrogation, conspiracy theory is an easy substitute, leaving the door open to anti-Semitic and racist projections. In turn, they call for art and popular culture that creates a systematic link to the bewildering movements of late capitalism, rather than fall into conspiratorial thinking. In this essay I argue Wolfson leaves a social link to conspiracy in his

film, *Animated, masks*. Although, by ambivalently playing around with stereotype he also risks falling into complicity with forces of unreason that are indifferent to ironic treatment. This essay discusses the critical contributions and limitations of this film, leading to an evaluation of Wolfson's conceptual performance as a whole.

Key Terms

'alt-right'; anti-Semitism; capitalism; cartoon; fascism; Marx; politics; race; Wolfson; Trump;

Introduction

The following investigation into Jordan Wolfson's conceptual use of animated film and animatronics was motivated by an unprepared encounter with the film, *Animation, masks*. It was recommended by an animator and friend who was both disturbed and bewildered by the ambivalent quality of the performance. Clicking the link put me face to face with a slick caricature of an instantly recognisable anti-Semitic stereotype, rendered in full animation and staring right out at me. The animation was playing on one tab and set against my desktop background, which was full of spreadsheets, desktop shortcuts and e-mail tabs. Behind me was the everyday muddle of an open plan academic office. This indifferent background accentuated the aliveness of the stereotype, which began to attract colleagues, who – like me – couldn't quite understand what they were watching. It did not feel like a film, more like a hack, which had infiltrated an otherwise typical day. At the same time, the violent history of the stereotype, which immediately summons up the horror of Hitlerism and Genocide, was complicated by the fact the image looked both professional and contemporary.

Traditional 'squash and stretch' animation techniques and CGI rendering solutions are used to emulate what Norman M Klein (1996:59) calls 'cartoon naturalism' – the tendency towards naturalistic illusion that Disney formalised as a factory style and has since dominated American animation production. The high technology setting of the Dreamworks character is however flattened out and alienated. Behind the character is a carousel of low-resolution stock images, which include New York loft apartments, streets packed with rubbish, and suburban interiors: middle class living rooms, kitchens and teenagers bedrooms. Everything in the film is derived from types: the background is made up of stock images of bourgeois or suburban types of world, while the 'evil Jew' dominates the foreground. The soundtrack is similarly estranged from the action. The dialogue does not synchronise with the transitions between mise-en-scene, sharpening the feeling that the character is mediating or standing in for people communicating in separation. This feeling was intensified when watching

the film on a desktop, surrounded by others working on theirs.

The film, *Animation, masks*, has been evaluated by Linda Norden (2013) as an expression of generational angst and the accelerated sociality of the internet. Esther Leslie (2013), by contrast, has focused on the way Wolfson draws out the falsehood of anti-Semitic stereotype with an estranged performance of its gestures. Although both of these readings are useful and important, Wolfson's strategy takes on a different dimension as the mobilisation of anti-Semitic conspiracies and codes have become more pervasive and crucial nodes for far right and fascist rebellion.

My own viewing of *Animation, masks*, was in 2016, in the middle of the American election and shortly after the Brexit result was announced. In 2017, Marine Le Pen organised her campaign for the French presidency around similar anti-immigrant and islamophobic positions to the Trump campaign. Alongside a flurry of rhetorical attacks on migrants, muslims and people of colour, both these campaigns mobilised hatred of technocratic or metropolitan 'elites'. Trump (2016), in a final attack advertisement for the Presidential campaign, deployed a jarring anti-Semitic montage that targeted 'global special interests'. Le Pen, whose far right organisation have a history of Holocaust Denial, televised a speech to voters claiming 'the time has come to defeat globalists' (Reuters, 2017). For both, the spectre of maligned global forces was invoked to indict their opponents in 'corruption' and 'treason'; blaming them for failing industries, immigration and a loss of supposed cultural values. Unlike the left-wing critique of elites, which however truncated, attempts to describe class antagonisms between a multiracial proletariat and capitalist oligarchy, the fascist version aims to organise an aggressive identification with white nationhood across the classes. For Trump, as with Le Pen, this political stratagem assumed a form of 'anti-establishment' opposition that substituted the dynastic histories of these two leaders for a persona adequate to the spectacle of popular rebellion.

In this essay, I will suggest that *Animation, masks*, leaves a social link to the accelerated circulation of conspiracy theory and fascist rebellion. Linda Norden (2013: 51), tells us that in the early stages of making the film, Wolfson was constructing his stereotype 'around an unsigned stock image from a scary page of Google options filed under 'evil Jew''. Norden (2013:53) provides a reproduction of the moodboard that includes these references, but does not analyse their historical context. The moodboard is in fact dominated by the anti-Semitic meme called 'Le Happy Merchant'. This caricature gained notoriety on the 4chan network in the years Wolfson was making his film, before becoming a cultural scaffold for fascist groups organising around the Donald Trump presidential campaign.

By framing the film in this way, in relation to the use of memes by fascists organising over the internet, my intention is to raise a question about the extent to which Wolfson's strategy can be judged to be critical. The essay will begin by investigating the history and contemporary role of the primary reference for *Animation, masks*, 'Happy Merchant', before addressing a number of other works by the artist that develop upon his use of animation and animatronics to bear witness to culture. My argument will be that by uncritically sourcing images of the internet, Wolfson risks fabricating and enlarging the 'anti-Semitic' images of fascist conspiracy. But by creating a social and critical link to contemporary forms of Anti-Semitism, Wolfson also indexes the historical re-emergence of this fascist spectre and its political associations. What then are the political stakes of Wolfson's performance of the 'evil Jew' stereotype and how is the animated cartoon used as a dramatic form adequate to it? In the essay that follows, Wolfson's animated performances of memes and stereotypes will be set against the role of modern Anti-Semitism for post-crash cultural formations of the far right.

Witnessing Culture

The gesture of the 'Le Happy Merchant' meme is always the same: the caricature of a stereotypical 'Jew' with hook nose, grinning and rubbing its hands together. It is a classic fascist trope, which draws upon the historical caricature of Nazi propaganda. But the meme is actually derived from a white American comic artist known as A. Wyatt Mann (synonym for Nick Bougas) – an associate of white supremacist groups in the 80s and 90s (Bernstein 2015). It emerged on 4chan as a meme after the millennium and continues to be iterated by fascist networks to denote some grotesque tenor of Jewish conspiracy. The moodboard originally cited and illustrated by Norden (2013:53) helps us to see how these memes were developing at the time *Animation, masks*, was in production. On his moodboard, for example, Wolfson includes a cartoon showing the 'Le Happy Merchant' transformed into an 'elephant in the room' surrounded by scientists scratching their heads. The scientists each exclaim in speech bubbles: 'It's the Illuminati' or 'It's the Reptilians' or 'Communists' or 'The Elites'. This ironic displacement could be read as a joke about the identical structure of different and widely popular conspiracy theories. For each, the 'elephant in the room' is the 'Jews' – therefore satirising something ridiculous and formulaic about conspiracy theory. At the same time, 'Le Happy merchant' is used to aggressively assert what conspiracy theorists only suggest: that the rise of vastly wealthy elites is not only a product of 'cultural Marxism', – a substitute for 'political correctness' – but that behind all such appearances or masks, there is the 'Jews' running things. Indeed, it is precisely this appeal to an ubiquitous, unassailable absent power, such as 'globalists' or 'global

special interests', which animates the 'anti-Semitic' nucleus of these forms of conspiracy theory.

In 2010/11, at the time *Animation, masks*, was in production, the connection between 4chan meme culture and far right political subjectivation was not being made. Despite the circulation of stereotypes such as 'Le Happy Merchant' on these networks, theoretical accounts of 4chan networks at the time were generally positive or even investigated as spaces of avant-garde experiments and rebellious valances. Andrea Nagle (2016), in her article, 'The New Man of 4chan', provides a summary of these positions. Nagle is especially critical of how liberal writers were swayed by the 4chan subversion of mainstream culture and its crossovers with the hacker collective, Anonymous. Arguing against the affirmative stance of Gabriella Coleman (2015) in particular, who was largely praised for her anthropology of Anonymous hacker spaces, Nagle (2016) instead locates an emergent, reactionary political subjectivity on 4chan, the 'beta-male', which became a popular identification shared by young male posters. She explains: 'Whereas alphas tend to be macho, sporty, and mainstream in their tastes, betas see themselves as less dominant males, withdrawn, obsessional, and curatorial in their cultural habits.' Against the recent currency of the 'geek' trope in popular culture as a gentle, inquisitive and socially awkward suburban male, Nagle (2016) observes the spillover of 4chan 'beta male' aggressions into misogynistic violences. The following is one of many connections between online misogyny and terroristic acts that Nagle (2016) includes in her study of 4chan:

In November 2014, an anonymous 4chan user submitted several photos of what appeared to be a woman's naked and strangled corpse, along with a confession... Later that same day, police in Port Orchard, Washington, announced that they were investigating a suspected homicide, after the thirteen-year-old son of a woman in her early thirties found her dead in their home. The victim, Amber Lynn Coplin, was indeed the woman in the 4chan/b/ photo. Her thirty-three-year-old live-in boyfriend, David Michael Kalac, was arrested after a brief police chase and charged with murder. Every dead body on 4chan is a joke, unless it isn't.

Even in esteemed networks of research and enquiry, the chauvinist fantasies circulating amongst 4chan 'beta-males' were commonly disavowed. Julian Dibble (2010) was writing about 4chan for the *MIT Technology Review* at a similar time to when Wolfson was working on *Animation, masks*. The author offers a breezy account of the 4chan phenomenon, pondering the commercial viability of the

enterprise against the 'borderline legality' of the gags, 'shot through with racism, misogyny, and other qualities deliberately chosen from beyond the contemporary pale.' Rather than interrogate why a good proportion of the gags on 4chan have such an aggressive, stereopathic agency, Dibble (2010) refers the reader to the 'high-minded' intentions of its founder, Christopher Poole, who argued, 'people deserve a place to be wrong'.

At the same time as these writers were advancing a progressive identification with the 4chan hivemind, Wolfson was already developing a performative relationship with the internet that in many ways finds a symmetry with the narcissistic drives organising this network. In Linda Norden's (2013:58) reading, for instance, we see a similar construction of autonomy to 4chan – a place to be 'inappropriate' rather than Poole's 'place to be wrong' – behind the artistic intentions of Wolfson:

Wolfson's understanding of his art, he has said, depends on knowing that there are things he would not do, but wants to know, and maybe show.... a ferreting out of a child's attunement to taboos or as an effort to create a space of recognition and permission, a performative space for a constructed character to say and do inappropriately.

Norden explains Wolfson's engagement with racist imagery as a kind of nuanced transgression, as a need to 'know' more, despite the fact that it is not private knowing but the public dissemination of imagery that is at stake. In this way, Norden remains faithful to the critical ambivalence that Wolfson looks to maintain in his performances. Despite his use of racist, misogynistic and political imagery, Wolfson is an artist who negates any suggestion of deliberate critical intent or political intervention. In one interview with Andrew Goldstein (2014), the artist recoils from any suggestion that his work is intervening in the politics of Anti-Semitism – or 'gender' and 'identity politics' – despite sourcing a stereotype that has played a central role in this politically violent history. Rather, Wolfson claims, his animation is about 'witnessing culture' and drawing these encounters back into his artworks.

In keeping with this ambivalent position, Norden (2013:52) resists any attempt to link *Animation, masks*, to stereotype, despite sourcing a moodboard full of contemporary anti-Semitic renderings. In her reading, the 'evil Jew' or 'Shylock' in Wolfson's film should be seen less as a 'type' than a 'carefully coded post-Pop... dimensional dummy – a kind of test vehicle – subject to the extreme force not of wind or speed, but of the kaleidoscopic onslaught of too much information or too many options.' The feeling we get from this reading is that the 'evil Jew' Wolfson

constructs has no historical agency any longer. Rather it emerges from the nihilistic tapestry of the internet, where images exchange meaning as 'dimensional dummies' for seemingly random effects. Norden (2013:49), in this way, defines the 'evil Jew' and other characters in Wolfson's artworks as 'surrogates' or substitutes for people, approximate to a 'generation increasingly defined by the conflation of digital screen and mirror – a mirror that floods, or overwhelms, an anxious echo that talks back in an endless assault of options.' What is left out of Norden's reading, however, is a class analysis of this generational upsurge in 'inappropriate' spaces and 'surrogate' identities that Wolfson constructs. Unable to acquiesce the currency of the 'evil Jew' stereotype in digital culture, or the specific media networks propagandising its reproduction, Norden defers to a generational analysis, which although useful, does also risk understating the political stakes of Wolfson's complicity with the internet.

In the five to six years since *Animation, masks*, was in production the 'Le Happy Merchant' has continued to evolve from being a popular conspiratorial meme on reddit and 4chan to a mascot of 'alt-right' fascist networks. The Trump supporting website, *Daily Stormer*, which has instigated a number of hacking campaigns to promote white supremacy and harass American people of colour and Jewish-Americans (Beckett, 2017), exemplifies the crossovers between 4chan culture and fascist militancy. The editor, Andrew Anglin (2014), provides a webpage dedicated to the 'Le Happy Merchant' meme that Wolfson collected three or four years earlier. It states: 'Some of these are funnier than others. But they are pretty funny. And factually accurate'. The page is replete with references to the meme Wolfson uses as the basis for his film. In one comic strip, the 'Le Happy Merchant' is selling subprime mortgages to people of colour, until the economy tanks. In another, it is compelling American voters to war with hamburgers and computer games or it is tricking white children into taking out loans and running off with the money. The sub-prime crash of 2008, in one comic strip, becomes racialised; Jewish power stands behind war and financial swindling, while black communities are puppets of their financial masters.

On another page, 'A Normie's guide to the alt-right', Anglin (2016) relates the use of caricature, comic strips and animated gifs to the propagandisation of white supremacy in the digital age. Against didactic forms of white nationalism, the 'alt-right', Anglin (2016) claims, is oriented to 'culture-jamming and various other forms of conscious social-engineering' that recognise, 'in an age of nihilism, that absolute idealism must be couched in irony in order to be taken seriously'. The technique of 'culture-jamming' is conventionally thought of as a left-wing tactic which owes a great deal to Situationists. The post-situationist technique of interrupting and reorienting media narratives for the 'alt-right' is however a direct

means of reviving fascist conspiracies. Anglin (2016) concludes his introduction to the 'alt-right' with the following:

It is now fully-documented that Jews are behind mass-immigration, feminism, the news media and Hollywood, pornography, the global banking system, global communism, the homosexual political agenda, the wars in the Middle East and virtually everything else the Alt-Right is opposed to.

What this 'Le Happy Merchant' artefact helps to clarify is the specific role of 'jewish conspiracy' for contemporary far right popular fronts. This racist projection can either be coded in reference to 'globalists' or 'global special interests' but is in effect summoning up a historical trope that has agency in these new times of crisis. Be it in oblique or explicit form, this invocation of a spectral power is intended to capitalise on a widespread hatred of capitalist power blocs, in order to promote white nationalist solutions to crisis. In a continuation of the 1930s Nazis conspiratorial schema, the 'Jews' for Anglin (2016) are invoked as an ethereal and unlimited power, responsible for economic crises, war and devastation. Though unlike the 1930s, or at least in America, the primary targets of persecution are racially oppressed groups that are specifically non-white: Muslims, Mexicans, Brown and Black people. Alongside LGBT people, these racialised groups are perceived as puppets of Jewish elites who conspire to destroy the 'white race', nation and family.

In the more recent context of rising nativism – Trump, Brexit and Le Pen being the most conjectural moments – the online circulation of *Animation, masks*, therefore takes on a more immanent relationship to a western society caught in the sails of political authoritarian insurgency. And in this way, the life of this artwork changes. The performance is no longer restricted to the reflective covenant of the artworld. Wolfson may have created *Animation, masks*, as a work to be exhibited in the white cube, but it also circulates amongst the slurry of anti-Semitic memes on the internet: a version of 'Le Happy Merchant' with higher production values. Whereas it may resonate in the white cube with arguments about the fragmentation of meaning and identity, it lives a second life as part of a campaign to mobilise a racist power bloc. Political actuality therefore changes the context in which Wolfson's work must be read. This context is better clarified when we ascertain to which class strata of the internet Wolfson is performing.

Although Wolfson's *Animation, masks*, now seems to acquire a dangerous complicity with 'alt-right' fascist networks, it also reveals something fundamental

about the way that new political subjectivities were forming through the 4chan network over the last five or six years. This is a strength of the work, when compared to the complacent left-debates that saw Anonymous and 4chan as progressive networks of counter-cultural rebellion, assuming them to be left wing, when in fact they contain many combinations of racist, misogynist and libertarian positions. This mistake was compounded by the tendency to view the internet as a kind of 'unconscious' bubbling away behind normal life, rather than an extra-economic space that extrapolates from class, race and gender divisions in society: the place where political subjectivities are both forming and intervening in political reality. In this context, the value of *Animation, masks*, and others of Wolfson's works is perhaps that they offer, despite the deficiencies in Wolfson's own critical strategy, an opportunity to read the social basis for these new reactionary political subjectivities.

Digital Suburb

Raspberry Poser (2012) is a second Wolfson artwork that gives us an important autobiographical link to the class strata that Wolfson is intuiting in his work. It is worth briefly addressing the key stresses of this film as they do suggest something of a *motif* that guides his conceptual performance as a whole. Unlike *Animation, masks*, in this accompanying film, Wolfson assumes not one, but many cartoonish persona. He performs characters in live action or characters perform him in cartoons. In one sequence, Wolfson takes up a 'punk' persona, gallivanting around Paris, staging narcissistic acts of rebellion. In another moment, he assumes the body of an 'angry cartoon kid' – derived from stock animation he purchased online – which is then adapted by professional animators to directly address the audience. In one scene it strangles itself and cuts open its own gut, whilst arrogantly smirking at its spectator. The spectator watches the film while sitting on the floor in a carpeted room, assuming the silhouette of a suburban adolescent watching TV.

Richard Birkett (2014), who provides a strong reading of this film and Wolfson's other works, quotes the artist referring to the whole film as a 'poser'. which Wolfson calls the measure of a subject 'that is what it is not' and can therefore be 'seen for what it is'. Wolfson's reflection on his childhood transition from being at a liberal New York school to a regular public school in a rich suburb of Connecticut, helps to elaborate the qualities of this motif. In an interview with Asher Penn (2012), Wolfson recollects the way he was compelled to exercise conformity by innovating a character adequate to his new suburban environment:

I was Jewish and had learning disabilities... But, when I was in New York

City, I was still Jewish and had learning disabilities, but it seemed like I was on top of the world.... [after moving] I learned about conformity. And I exercised conformity... I wasn't as exposed to these systems of social hierarchy that exist between kids at schools in more suburban settings—I never understood the concept of popularity until I moved to Connecticut.

In the same interview Wolfson discusses different phases in adolescence where he adopted various countercultural identities, such as the 'skateboarder', as he attempted to carve out a rebellious curvature to his identity in an environment that was vigorously conformist. Eventually this skateboarder phase petered out as he moved into art making. Wolfson says, 'art making was just something that was bigger than all of that for me... I had been part of this skate culture and I was a conformist. To a degree I was trading one badge for another' (Penn, 2002). We see these experiences pulled into relief through the 'anti-establishment' persona or 'surrogates' that Wolfson performs in *Raspberry Poser*. In this film, the bearer of punk identity is performed by the stereotype, autonomy is subsumed within an image: it takes over, like a moving sculpture, acquiring a simulacrum of rebellion, while innovating conformity. Wolfson spells out the way the punk motif of rebellion can be seen, first from the outside, as someone looking on, and then through the mind of the one performed by it:

It was the distortion of sex and turning my body into a kind of object or sculpture and also a cliché of a certain type...

The punk is the conformist. He is the paradox of conformity and conformity in himself. That's how it started. But when I was shooting the video, I felt so proud to be this punk and everyone else looked so normal to me in their regular clothing. I felt like I got the whole punk thing wrong, but I didn't—I was just seeing it from the other side (Penn, 2012).

In *Raspberry Poser*, Wolfson seems to be picking up on his experience of the suburb and tunnelling in on the narcissistic falsehoods of suburban rebellion. This film strengthens the social link constructed in *Animation, masks*, where we come face to face with the popular expression of a digital network that is imprisoned in a stereopathic rebellion against evil powers and outsiders. The suburb metamorphoses into what we can call the 'digital suburb', where angry cartoon kids – devolved into anonymous avatars – have the chance to become larger than life emanations of conformist fantasies and compensatory aggressions. 4chan is the ideal expression of the 'poser' finding a permanent modality of suburban rebellion. In here, everyone is truly free to appropriate and humiliate everyone else.group

through an identification against women and perceived political correctness. This is not rebellion as solidarity with others and the othered, but always narcissistically consumed in the class privileges of its own community and the feeling that these privileges are being alienated or restricted by inferiors and outsiders. As a result, the taboo being toyed with is always oriented to the degradation of the out-group category: women, Black, disabled, Jewish, queer, Muslim – no category of outsider goes unpunished.

In the previously mentioned analysis of the 'beta male', Nagle (2016) registers the emergence of this narcissistic male community. The connection Wolfson makes between the 'angry cartoon kid' and 4chan meme culture has proximity to this scene. In more recent work, Nagle (2017) also claims that a left-wing focus on identity politics is partly responsible for shutting down debate and fostering far right resentment. This aspect of her argument is problematic because it obscures the work of Black liberation movements, notably Black Lives Matter, to push back against systemic – not countercultural – white supremacy. Nagle's argument risks legitimizing the far right's pet grievance, which is that they are oppressed by left-wing political correctness and 'cultural marxism'. There is not sufficient space to properly critique Nagle's position in this article, although it is concerning that a fascist figurehead such as Richard Spencer has praised her work on social media. Categories of identification that divide people by race, gender, psychology, physiology and sexuality are not freely assumed and left-wing online cultures are the most active in struggling against the divisiveness of lived ideology of this kind. Fascists, by contrast, always promote static categories of identity, even when using post-situationist media tactics. Figureheads of the far right may claim they are rebelling against 'identity politics' or the regression of 'free speech' but the 'alt-right' aesthetic is a sort of variety act where a play of rebellious masks communicates the fixed categories of white supremacy.

Both *Animation, masks*, and *Raspberry Poser* examine the operation of masks in relation to groups whose identities are formed in relation to their socialisation within suburbanised digital networks. Indeed, they are dialogic expressions of suburban angst, faux rebellion and stereotypy. However, there is great difference between the mask of the punk, which dates to the 1970s, and the 'evil Jew' which runs very deeply into the exploitation of racial division by reactionary power elites. The difference is not only historical. Wolfson shows how subcultural identities can be more or less freely assumed and discarded by white teenagers. Punk 'provocation' returns with each generation, as each new generation discovers its gestures. The stereotype performed by *Animation, masks*, however, is a more systematic identification and one that is not freely assumed by anyone. It is a

specific form of racism that continues to exist within our culture and which cannot be assumed and thrown off with nihilistic abandon. Rather, however ridiculous, it is imposed on those who are Jewish and becomes a keystone for a fascist conformism that poses as 'anti-establishment'. Indeed, this fantasy continues to circulate, imbued with the power to revive right-wing fantasies and mobilise electoral power.

Wolfson's performance of the 'poser' helps to ascertain a class position the artist is mirroring through a collaboration with the internet. The connection to 4chan Anti-Semitism in *Animation, masks*, is complemented by a cartoonish construction of suburban rebellion in *Raspberry Poser*. The interplay of the 'punk' and 'angry cartoon kid' helps Wolfson to construct his poser *motif*: the subject that feigns rebellion by innovating conformity. Wolfson, however, bears witness to these developments in digital culture through a dangerous identification with a malicious media network and in this next section we begin to register the critical tensions of his aesthetic strategy. In focus here is the technique of ventriloquy that I argue is fundamental to Wolfson's conceptual performance as whole, producing artworks that strike up new symmetries with the maligned forces driving political authoritarian reaction.

Ventriloquies of Unreason

In *Animation, masks*, the 'evil Jew' deforms, to such a great extent, that the nose flops out like a gigantic phallus. In another sequence, the 'evil Jew' arches its back, seducing the spectator, hinting at a sexually transgressive nature, which Wolfson then carries over into a scripted conversation with an imaginary girlfriend, where they discuss the appearance of his genitals. In another sequence, the 'evil Jew' hides behind a vogue magazine, playing the scapegoat, the invisible power, which stands behind the degenerate culture that *Daily Stormer* perceived in the conspiracy of Jewish power. The protagonist is 'rootless', that is to say, Wolfson's character is literally without legs, floating above a flattened out world of stock images, further accentuating the quality of ethereal power that this conspiracy animates. Wolfson hires animation professionals to visualise the fetish that the anti-Semitic imagination attempts to rationalise and in so doing – in making it 'real' – brings it into the realm of estrangement and falsity.

In the book, *Cartographies of the Absolute*, Toscano and Kinkle (2014:24) connect the

contemporary surge in conspiracy theory to a protracted crisis of global capitalism, which shows no signs of recovery after the 2008/9 global financial crash. Toscano and Kinkle take the social reality of capitalism as their starting point and make a simple point that this is a very difficult reality to represent (8). And if the logic of capital cannot be represented, fetish actors are posed in its place, personifying its devastating effects (69). The authors link to examples from popular culture and art that make a more systematic link to the abstractions that pose social actors, without recourse to moral sentiment. Where the latter attempts to personify the chaotic effects of capitalism as the vices of hidden powers or bad people, systematic renderings pull some aspect of capital into relief.

In one passage, Toscano and Kinkle (2014:43) refer to Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976) as a successful historical representation of capitalism at the dawn of the neoliberal age. The film is set within a media network and describes a TV anchor in the midst of a corporate takeover. For Toscano and Kinkle (2014:43), the exemplary scene in this film is that of Ned Beatty and Hume Cronyn metamorphosing into 'valets of financial abstraction'. Perched at either side of a board room, Beatty stands up and breaks out into a bizarre modernist soliloquy to describe, in fragmented and breathless garbled prose, the new world of multinational capital. In this wonderful and surreal sequence, Beatty appears to ventriloquise the abstract demands of capital, becoming a talking head, speaking in tongues about money, currencies, borderless expansions and turnover. Toscano and Kinkle (2014:44) link this scene to the way Marx (1974:254) in *Das Kapital* describes the capitalist not as an individual, but as a human being that has lost the autonomy of a subject; who has become, 'capital personified', with the sole aim to pursue 'ever more... wealth in the abstract'. In this inverted world, nobody is quite in control, even when they think it's all about them: agency is displaced from people to capital, from the living to economic value, the dead animating the living. This rendering of a subjectless subject, the bearer of capital, driven under the sway of capitalist unreason, connects to the way Wolfson himself steps into fetish forms, which he allows to take over and perform him. The 'evil Jew' stereotype that Wolfson performs, however perverse, exists as a truncated expression of capitalist dominion. This meme circulates as the expression of a world absented of critique, called upon as a substitute to explain a crisis that is ghostly and imperious precisely because no person or group is above the absolute monarchy of the system itself.

Leslie (2013:17), in this way, suggests that by acting out this stereotype in all its 'Jewishness' Wolfson shows us a 'cliche... which happens to be true, but only because the default of truth today is falsity'. In Leslie's reading, Wolfson is overidentifying with the violent absurdity of the anti-Semitic fetish in order to show

us the falsity of the world from which it emerges. This capacity for estrangement in animation, Leslie (2013:17) argues, is its most precious feature: the 'faux-messianic light' that exposes the normal world for 'what it is, a place of caricature and estrangement'.

Wolfson has no obvious critical intent, though we can in this way recognise a commitment to recoil the reified thinking of late capitalism into dramatic form. His decision to retract into the internet and *swim with the tide* gets him as close as possible to the immediate surface of reality, animated by the lightening speed reception and reproduction of news and conspiracy. This aesthetic commitment returns a performance that posits a social link to his internet collaborators: the passive nihilism of online counterculture metamorphosing into the active nihilism of fascist stagecraft. *Animation, masks*, in this way, can be read as a ventriloquism of the perverse fantasies organising this web of faux-rebellion. Wolfson is absorbing and performing the social separation of the unraced white subject from others, even in the case of his 'evil Jew' – a category of others by which the artist is himself exposed.

What perhaps prevents this strategy of overidentification from becoming exploitative or simply 'shocking' is that Wolfson is implicating a reactionary subjectivity within the performance, leaving a social link to the ventriloquies of unreason organising the contemporary imageworld. This is not autobiographical art, but an interrogation of narcissistic subjectivity. Wolfson may identify this in himself, or in the atmosphere of suburban Connecticut, but he is clearly more concerned with this subjectivity as a social tendency. His critique of the internet therefore tends towards its most narcissistic quarters: an inversion of the vulgarised detournement that has come to dominate digital space and bourgeois counterculture.

4chan and the 'alt-right' fascists pride themselves on the ingenuity and agency of the subject or troll to 'culture jam' and subvert mainstream culture, but one of the reasons Wolfson's 'evil Jew' both assumes and escapes an identification with this fascist set is because it produces a melancholic and stagnant portrait of its imagined vitality. His images of empty teenagers bedrooms, which circulate behind the 'evil Jew' in *Animation, masks*, mirror the empty subjective interior of the narcissistic subject. In contrast to a propensity of the 'alt-right' towards showmanship and spectacular 'culture jamming', the political subjectivities Wolfson is identifying in his work are banal and conformist. Wolfson's 'poser' perfectly describe fascist provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos (2016), who plays the punk to the mainstream media he claims to oppose. Or Andrew Anglin (2016) and friends, who troll their enemies from the comfort of their bedrooms, innovating their own prison house of language. The fascist loses all subjectivity and fundamentally conforms to structures already operative in

society, which they fetishise to extremity.

Ticket Thinking

Wolfson's motif of the 'poser' continues to organise his dialogue with the internet and society as his artworks become increasingly proximate to a society free falling into barbarism. When posing his thought towards immediacy and abolishing the opportunity for critical reflection, Wolfson has the effect of exposing the capitalist unconscious and giving it dramatic form. Racist stereotypes were in the foreground of animation history before they gradually became coded through the stereotypical structures of Hollywood narrative: dressed up in CGI garb, or mediated through the ironic nihilism of the adult cartoon. In *Animation, masks*, Wolfson indexes a resurgence of stereotypes shedding their dramatic skins and becoming more obscenely orchestrated. Wolfson just about survives his experiment with the 'Happy Merchant' meme, I would argue, drawing his investigation under control, isolating it, so he is not also swallowed whole by the malignant internet set he draws into the work. In his embrace of the immediate surface of reality, Wolfson gets as close as possible to the perverse agency of the stereotype, but can only do so by disabling critical reflection. This refusal to take a stand, paradoxically, contributes one potential critical impulse running through this film. Wolfson embraces the moment where all availability for reflection is abolished in order to see things for what they really are.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1997:170) used the term 'ticket thinking' to describe entrapment in malignant identifications. They described this as the plane of ordinary thinking, not isolated to individuals, but a schema of conceptual identifications upon which we live our lives, where rationality is captured and votes cast:

Illusion has become so concentrated that to see through it objectively assumes the character of hallucination. To vote for a ticket, by contrast, means to practice adaptation to illusion petrified as reality, which endlessly reproduces itself through such adaptation. (170)

The constant encouragement to identify with how society is and will always be encourages conformity through a constraint over our autonomy to think and gather freely, away from the compulsion to work and produce, pay the rent, buy homes and compete. The notion of 'hallucination' that Adorno and Horkheimer say is required to think objectively can be connected to Wolfson's voluntary freefall into the septic tank of the internet. When refused an encounter with conceptual underpinnings holding together reality, which are naturalised through the everyday, thinking is at risk of circulating what is already presupposed in advance. Extrapolating from the everyday

and isolating its hallucinogenic and delirious contours, is one passage, in this inverted world, to objective thought. For Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 166), Anti-Semitism signals the opposite tendency – a narcissism that cannot see past its own fundamental conformity:

anti-Semitic views always reflected stereotyped thinking. Today only that thinking is left. People still vote, but only between totalities. The anti-Semitic psychology has largely been replaced by mere acceptance of the whole fascist ticket.

Motivating the conspiracy theorist is a narcissistic compulsion to keep recycling and adapting the given reality, clawing at any 'evidence' it can twist, drawing new plot-lines into its narrative thicket. The electoral breakthrough of white nationalism in America, following the success of the Trump campaign, rested on a similar form of stereopathic thinking. Orbited by the 'alt-right', this anti-establishment position relied heavily on anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. Indeed, after Steve Bannon – a former associate of the far-right media network *Breitbart* – became campaign director, the critique of 'globalists' and establishment interests took on a sharper anti-Semitic resonance. In *Donald Trump's Argument For America* (2016), politicians, bankers and financial capitalists are montaged against deserted factories and American families. Trump tells the story: 'For those who control the levers of power in Washington and for the global special interests, they partner with these people that don't have your good in mind.' In perfect sync with the narration, images of the Clintons and Barack Obama are montaged with representatives of the 'global special interests' who are also all Jewish: financier George Soros, Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen, and Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein. Each shot of devastation is montaged to a Jewish person in power. The whole spectacle reads something like an introduction to *Wrestlemania*, with the good and bad characters clearly delineated, but at the same time it is effectively imitating a historical schema necessary for reactionary power blocs to navigate crisis. On the bad side are 'globalist' establishment interests that threaten to subvert democracy. On the other side is the good, honest side of capitalism: American workers, Christians, small businesses and productive labour. The latter are identified as real Americans in crisis. The former made responsible for allowing unproductive and violent immigrants to terrorise the living standards and prosperity of real Americans.

This is precisely the dichotomy Adorno and Horkheimer (1997:137) perceived in their 'Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment' which even today provides crucial reading for understanding the fundamental conformity of fascism. Historically in the West, European Jews were excluded from the national workforce and forced to serve the circulation sphere, the realm of money, goods and knowledge. Adorno and

Horkheimer's (1997:144) argued that a reasoned critique of economic crisis would note the interdependency of industry and finance, but this would necessarily inaugurate a critique of capitalism, *tout court*. Instead, an evil power is exorcised:

Trade was not his vocation, it was his fate. The Jews were the trauma of the knights of industry, who have to masquerade as productive creators... Having been prevented from putting down roots they were then criticized as rootless... the banker and the intellectual, money and mind, the exponents of circulation, are the disowned wishful image of those mutilated by power, an image which power uses to perpetuate itself,'

This narrative is familiar to both Anglophone and European political authoritarianism. Faux rebellion requires the hook of an absent power, in order to validate its racist and misogynistic campaign trail. But what is altogether betrayed by the 'anti-establishment' fascist is that the establishment creates the 'ticket' on which the fascist runs. In the context of the 2016 American election, Clinton showed herself to be no less a ticket thinker than Trump. Both share the same fidelity to abstract economic and extra-economic categories, each figuring out which version of America would best mask the deadly realities of American capitalism. The faux-rebellion of fascism grows out of the faux-reason of liberalism. Toscano and Kinkle (2014:72) help us link the two political forms: 'Conspiracy theory presupposes the fantasy of an ordered society that is prevented from being harmonious by the conspirators behind the scenes, rather than by any fundamental (class, gender, or racial) antagonisms'. Though just as maligned is a fidelity to 'contingency', the transcendental ground of liberalism. Toscano and Kinkle (2014:73) explain this in the following way: 'According to contingency theory history is driven by random chaos, chance, accident'. In this way, 'theory of contingency' is able to disavow any conceptual identification to anything. Clinton was the passive aggressive 'poser', to recall Wolfson's concept, the conformist who maintains a fidelity to the false objectivity of the world, by disavowing its antagonisms entirely. No better exemplified than in the anaemic response of the Democrats to Trump's libidinous nationalism: 'America is great because America is good' (O'Sullivan, 2016).

However dangerous the presentation, Wolfson is a performative mirror to what is already in motion. This is the most terrifying aspect of his work, if seen from the view of the contemporary triangulation of economics and politics, where the latter, awarded an authoritarian valence, reconciles the crisis of the former. This situation is even more frightening when we consider how Wolfson continues to anticipate current trends, or rather, how his work is transformed by historical time. Wolfson's animatronic sculpture, *Coloured Sculpture* (2016), features another iteration of the 'angry cartoon kid' that he first developed in *Raspberry Poser*. This time the character is 'Huck Finn'

inspired, reconstructed as an animatronic and hung on chains, then flung around the white cube, driven by algorithms. This hero of the white liberal imagination, Huckleberry Finn, paddling down the Mississippi to bring back tales of slavery and the need for reform, is suddenly the one in chains, glaring demonically at its bourgeois spectator. This performance is blithely observed by Ben Davis (2016) as 'a note-perfect illustration of how the circuit between the museum and the fairground will be closed.' Ajay Kurian (2016) gives it a different take. Following up the Trump victory with a belated review of *Coloured Sculpture*, he calls it a 'ballet of white victimhood' that animates the intersecting spectres of masculinity and whiteness, propelling Trump to power: 'This is not just any body, not a universal body, this is a white male body, and it is haunting us.'

Conclusion

The focus of this essay has developed from the stereotype that Wolfson worked through his film, *Animation, masks*, to the historical and social world it continues to perform. The 'evil Jew' is what Wolfson allows to perform and speak him. He also traps it – taking control of it and rubs it up the right way, so its performance can be seen. The practical unreason of stereotypes have indeed come alive, becoming subjects in their own right. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) saw this realised in the lead up to fascism, but their *Dialectics of Enlightenment* was actually witnessing the postwar development of American liberalism, which as a child of western progress, carried over the same authoritarian structures that led to fascist Germany.

The western political authoritarian turn can be witnessed today, not only in America, but across western Europe and the post-socialist bloc. Hungary under Viktor Orban, orbited by the fascist group Jobbik, has taken a militant anti-immigration stance, saying, 'All who have come illegally should be picked up and taken away' – a call for violent deportation strategies from Europe's already deadly border regime that was immediately pounced upon by *Breitbart* headline writers as a cause for celebration (Tomlinson, 2016). These strong armed 'anti-establishment' attacks on refugees correspond with an upsurge in both anti-Semitic and nativist structures of feeling in Hungary (Agence France-Presse, 2015). The 'evil Jew' that Wolfson constructed a couple of years following the 2008/9 financial crash, today raises itself up as a sentient being, whilst the glib irony of postmodernism comes crashing down. The crudest aspects of the postmodern turn celebrated the freedom to move in and out of language as if it were a body of forms to be manipulated and tamed. Wolfson also identifies with this idea and the result is a family of animated and animatronic horrors that perfectly index the truth of our times. Commodity language never went away and nor do its political expressions. In times of crisis, stereotypes take up dangerous positionalities as objects of political enterprise, arbitrating the convictions of 'national conversation',

levering at the violent logics of the state, orientating policy and the movement of people and regularly invoked as a standard bearers for popular sentiment. But crucially, avoiding capitalism as the focus of critique.

Where then, to conclude, does the critical operate in Wolfson's work? Wolfson holds no critical intent, though it would be naive in any case to expect political activism from an artist embroiled in the art market. Hatherley (2009) registered this in his visceral take down of the radical pretence of 'altermodernism' – the tired residuum of an interesting and radical history of institutional critique and relational aesthetics. Hatherley here perceives a faux critique that carries over an avant-garde link, but without any recourse to locate and negate the social form it supposedly stands opposed to. It would be even more ridiculous for Wolfson to feign a radical art practice, though he does facilitate critique. Despite being thoroughly embroiled in the art market, Wolfson also leaves it open to ridicule. In his work, high and low culture are drawn together into an accelerated complicity. The manufactured cartoon, white cube and fascist meme all share the same culture in Wolfson's artworks. The art world has no autonomy in his work because in its own way it is as thoroughly conformist as the feature cartoon. Indeed, now that Wolfson has transformed the white cube into a fairground, perhaps the more revolutionary minded artists should also switch it up, disband the *Biennale* and go off making anti-capitalist cartoons? They would at least get the chance to reach a working class audience. Wolfson's decision to interrogate his own separation from the society he is awarded the autonomy to critique, is arguably more authentic than fraudulent political commitments staged in Soho galleries, contemporary art centres and massive art buying tents. The decision, more, to interrogate the separations that define him – straight, rich, white, Jewish – provide a novel and self-reflexive critique of white petit-bourgeois narcissism. Indeed, Wolfson gives us an opportunity to consider the wider development of this social tendency.

The Jewish stereotype Wolfson performs through animation is dredged up and speaks him; rebelling, though tamed, touched, inflected and twisted round, until it is autonomous of both Wolfson and society. The 'evil Jew' reveals itself, consequently, as abstract and real, generative of maligned thought, reposed as a totem or erotic tie enlivened by digital *volk* who obsessively draw and redraw the same gag, adapted and generalised to include every rotation of a world that already abstracts and separates, that already does, what this maligned community of racists and misogynists want it to do. Though it could also be argued that Wolfson, as time moves on, is actually becoming subsumed in the visual culture of far right and fascist internet culture. And the risk here is that through this proximity his animated performance is slowly collapsing into it. Wolfson's ambivalence allows all these readings to stand up. But animation can also sometimes help us see things more clearly when we accept its

complicity in unreason.

This is something Leslie (2002) demonstrates in her book on animation, critical theory and the avant-garde, *Hollywood Flatlands*. The journey of the Walt Disney cartoon that Leslie provides leaves behind a trail of luminous historical slime. Follow this trail and we begin to register a transition. Disney moves from avant-garde experimentation in the 1920s and early 30s to a more harmonious naturalism, which substituted Sergei Eisenstein's embrace for a new bunch of admirers: Riefenstahl and Goebbels. Leslie continues to pursue a critical path for animation in her contemporary survey of its forms, which includes Jordan Wolfson. One critical contribution of animation history then, is that it provides an opportunity to read our social forms aloud. Both poetics and poison are historical to the animated film and western cartoon. Its caricatures and stereotypes are the immanent product of commodity language and manufacture. Wolfson's *Animation, masks*, and his contemporary use of animation is on the side of poison, of horror. It brings to life a bizarre trope, but the artist shows it to have agency in contemporary history – something that needs to be addressed and understood. Seen together, his animated works register a white, authoritarian reaction, reproduced in memes and caricatures on anonymous online platforms and striking up favour with presidents. There are no shortage of interesting and emancipatory uses of the internet, yet it remains an extension of the capitalist class relation and gendered and racialised histories of oppression. Not excusing himself or hiding behind the critical sign of the artist, Wolfson accepts the contradictory separations of his subjecthood as the starting point for a peculiar documentary theatre that exorcises the culture that poses him. This aesthetic reasoning provides, at the very least, the precise negation of the internet as an exclusive emancipatory terrain and begs for a world where reason can stand on its feet.

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